

Japanese government rams through new immigration law

By Gary Alvernia
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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government has pushed through legislation that will ease Japan's highly restrictive immigration policies. The law passed the lower house last week and the upper house on Saturday, despite stalling tactics by the opposition parties. It will come into effect next April.

While portrayed as a "liberalisation" of existing policy, the law reflects concerns within ruling circles over the economic impact of Japan's declining workforce. The opposition parties have criticised the legislation's vague wording and alleged lack of safeguards, saying it will lead to an influx of cheap labour.

The law is aimed at attracting semi-skilled workers to Japan. From next year to 2025, half a million overseas workers will be permitted to work in areas of labour shortage and stay as long as five years, with the possibility of qualifying for an additional five-year period.

Changes implemented in April mean that skilled workers and professionals can reduce the time needed to acquire permanent residency from 5 years to either 3 or 1, based on income, experience and job description.

Japan has historically and consistently maintained strict policies against immigration, making the acquisition of citizenship, and even permanent residency, difficult for low-skilled workers who cannot prove ethnic Japanese descent. The policy of *Jus sanguinis* ("right of blood") in granting citizenship means that even a child born in Japan will not become a citizen unless at least one parent is ethnically Japanese and a citizen.

In addition, foreign-born residents of Japan often have been subject to persistent xenophobia and discrimination in job hiring, wages and political rights, with little effort made by the government to assist with

language training and other support.

This discrimination is rooted in Japan's geographical isolation and the exclusion of foreigners in feudal times. Following World War II, anti-immigrant measures were continued, in particular through the 1952 dis-enfranchisement (loss of citizenship) of ethnic Koreans and Chinese who had immigrated to Japan, or been brought over as forced labourers before and during the war. Racist and nationalist claims of a "racially homogenous" Japan as necessary for social harmony have served as a key ideological pillar of capitalist rule.

Although some of the most overt and racist forms of discrimination against foreigners were relaxed from the 1980s, ongoing restrictions have meant that the number of non-citizens in Japan, including around 400,000 descendants of those disenfranchised in 1952, is only 2.5 million, or barely 2 percent of the population. By contrast, other developed nations currently have immigrant numbers of around 10-25 percent of their population.

Even this small proportion of immigrants in Japan reflects a substantial change. Since the early 1990s, the immigrant population has more than doubled, and foreign-born youth increasingly make up a larger proportion of the population in the major cities. Demographic research published by *NHK news* this year estimated that roughly 1 in 8 people under the age of 20 in Tokyo was foreign-born, with the proportion rising to 20 percent in six of the city's 23 wards.

The immigration intake in 2016 was roughly 430,000, placing Japan fourth among the developed nations. In addition, whereas immigrants previously came predominantly from Korea, China, Taiwan and Brazil, growing numbers now originate from Vietnam, India, Iran and Western Europe.

The primary motivation for increasing immigration is to boost the workforce. As a result of steeply declining birth rates since the 1980s, Japan's population peaked in 2004. By some estimates, Japan's population will fall from 125 million to less than 100 million by 2050, with its labour force dropping from 65 million to 40 million. The shrinking population is ageing also. The proportion of people over 65 years old has risen to 28 percent—one of the highest levels in the world.

Japan is already confronting labour shortages, particularly in low-wage sectors like aged-care nursing, hospitality, agriculture, residential construction and shipbuilding, with roughly three jobs for every two available workers. This is not the result of a booming economy, but a diminishing workforce.

While Japan is often held up by the right-wing in other countries as a model of restricted immigration, the result has not been higher wages or better living standards, as is often claimed. On the contrary, the average wage rise of just 2.1 percent this year was the highest increase in 21 years, despite the acute labour shortages.

The cause of the population decline is the persistent stagnation of Japan's economy since the late 1980s, the deep inroads into living standards by governments and corporations through the casualisation of the workforce, and attacks on essential services such as education. Without the prospect of a stable future, many workers and youth have put off having families.

Incapable of addressing these social issues, the ruling class is looking for other sources of cheap labour. Abe's initial strategy was to force the elderly and women to enter the workforce by cutting their meagre welfare benefits. Now he is looking to ease, but not remove, immigration restrictions that have an overt class-based character. A points-based system ensures there is an ongoing preference for skilled and wealthier migrants.

The new law formally includes some safeguards such as equal wages, but the detail is yet to be spelled out. There is no guarantee that workers entering the country under the new law will not suffer from the exploitation and discrimination facing foreign workers at present.

Ippei Torii, director of Solidarity Network with Migrants Japan (SNMJ) outlined to CNN how workers are exploited. He described how unskilled workers, especially from poorer nations, are often forced to enter

Japan through “backdoor” routes, working without a valid visa, and thus face constant threats of deportation unless they accept terrible working conditions.

Others are subject to abuse through programs like the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), which claims to provide useful training, but in reality condemns them to menial work under harsh conditions.

During a parliamentary hearing in November, trainees described attempting suicide due to long hours and extremely low wages. One Chinese worker stated that she worked 16 hours a day for just 300 yen (\$2.63) per hour. Roughly a quarter-million foreign workers are hired under the TITP.

The new law will not lessen the exploitation of foreign workers or “liberalise” Japanese society. On the contrary, unable to recruit the necessary manpower using its current methods, the Japanese ruling class is seeking other means to increase the flow of cheap, vulnerable migrants to exploit.

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